

## **REVIEW: NATIONS OF BRITAIN**

*John MacInnes*

Christopher G A Bryant, **The Nations of Britain**, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005. xii + 316 pp, pb, £21.99, ISBN: 0198742878.

The constitutional reforms of the Blair government of 1997 have stimulated renewed interest from journalists, historians and sociologists on what might be called (but significantly almost never is) the ‘national question’ in Britain. Chris Bryant’s contribution to this growing literature has three chief merits. First, it deals comprehensively with all four ‘nations’ of Britain, as he is adamant that ‘Britain’ merits this term just as much as its constituent parts of Scotland, England and Wales. Second, it has a fierce eye for historical detail and the stamina to insist upon it in a comprehensive historical and sociological review. As well as chapters dedicated to Scotland, Wales and England, Bryant considers the legacy of Imperial Britain at length as well as Britain’s contemporary ‘international’ relations with the European Union, the Commonwealth, and the United States. He also devotes a chapter to prospects for the reorganisation of government in the English regions. Third, the impressive volume of empirical evidence considered ranges over historical outlines of the genesis of the contemporary British state, the details of constitutional arrangements and treaties to a battery of empirical surveys (Eurobarometers, Gallup polls, the Census etc). He cites an astonishing range of secondary material from political science, sociology, history, law and anthropology as well as ‘popular’ comment, such as the essays by Jeremy Paxman or Andrew Marr. Such comprehensiveness will surely see this book head students’ reading lists in a range of different courses, as well as providing a useful reference work for scholars and for Bryant’s intended but always elusive audience: ‘fellow citizens contemplating the future of Britain’ (p.2). This dense empirical and analytical diet is leavened by personal observations and judgments which range from the incisive: e.g. his insistence on careful

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definition and use of the term 'Britain', or the distinction between militant Englishness and racism; through the waspish – historians careless of detail or context get short shrift from Bryant: 'It sometimes seems as if the Whig interpretation of English/British history ... has gone into reverse' (p. 9) – to the highly questionable: 'Those who still share a national identification with Britain have not had the support of the BBC' (p.11).

Bryant starts off with no less than a page of questions, although it is clear that his focus is how the future constitutional shape of the UK state will relate to the shifting and multi-layered national identities within it. Thus he argues that it is possible to identify various 'constructions' of Britain and its constituent nations, and it is fairly clear which constructions Bryant sees as both more attractive as well as attuned to the realities of a contemporary globalising world. 'British Britain' is basically a xenophobic, backward looking, dull 'Little Britain' (close relation of Little England). 'Cosmopolitan Britain', by contrast, 'is like Cosmopolitan England only more so. It combines the old diversity of English, Scots, Welsh, and citizens of other origins (Irish, Jewish, etc.) with the new diversity of citizens from the Commonwealth (very often the new Commonwealth), post-war Europe (from Poland, Italy, etc.), and other parts of the world, and its economy benefits from the migrant labour of non-citizens. Cosmopolitan Britain can be hard to manage but the rewards of managing it well are great.' (p.287) Depending on what the Scots decide, Cosmopolitan Britain may or may not avert its break up. Following Spain's success in developing asymmetrical devolution of power, there is reason to think that Britain's similarly *ad hoc* approach 'has rescued the union for a generation or more' (p.296). He criticises Linda Colley's emphasis on anchoring Britishness to the realisation of citizenship rights rather than cultural substance as 'incoherent' because it is too universal. What could be distinctly *British* about such a project he asks? Rather Britain is 'reforgeable in terms of some distinctive configuration of common culture, the riches of multiculturalism, differences from Europe, the product of internal migration and intermarriage, and positively valued aspects of Britain's historical legacy.' (p.296)

How can such a volume of scholarship ultimately deliver such an underwhelming conclusion? One answer is that Bryant engages with those who have not hesitated to rush to extravagant opinions on the basis of limited enquiry and reflection. Neither Britain, Britishness nor the Union are either about to fall to pieces or be flattened by 'Europe'. However, this goes beyond the matter of exercising suitable academic caution. What I found lacking in

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Bryant's approach was a more articulate theory of the link between 'national identity' and the constitution of the state and, in particular, reflection about just what sort of animal 'national identity' might be.

Bryant analyses 'constructions' of national identity in Britain in terms of the orientation to time (basically how they compare past and present) and place (more ambiguous but basically whether their orientation is primarily external, to Britain or to a country within it). He follows David Easton, arguing that the question 'who are we?' is basic to the constitution of the state, since that we is 'never universal' but 'always particular'. I agree. 'In play here are passions' (p.14) he argues, in implicit contrast to the rational calculation of interest that dominates the rest of politics. Thus, presumably, analysing construction of national identities in Britain will give us insight into the state of these 'passions' and their evolution. I am less sure about this.

With very few exceptions, states are the legacy of dynastic intrigue and conquest. Bryant gives a marvellously succinct description of the UK state's genesis in just such terms. Its subjects' passions had little to do with it. What is true is that once modernised and democratised, states have to legitimate not only democracy as such, but also their particular, territorial, fragment of it. The best way to do this has been to claim that this particularity expresses the nature, or rather, 'national identity', of its people. This has three consequences. First, national identity is discursive: it is not, under normal circumstances, an empirical characteristic that individuals possess that surveys might measure. Second, in Britain as elsewhere, it sits uneasily with human mobility. Individuals and groups migrate and always have migrated across what are now state frontiers, so that myths of separate 'peoples' (the foundational 'we' of any national identity complete with assorted cultural baggage) need the sort of continual rewriting of history in the light of current events that Soviet 'scientific' socialism once required. Finally, national identity is inevitably victim of an irresolvable discursive contradiction. To legitimate its territorial particularity it must lay claim to universality: what 'we' share. But the original *raison d'etre* of this foundational 'we' is the enfranchisement of its substantive internal diversity: 'our' right to share nothing, to be sovereign individuals in a democratic process. The contradiction is resolved by turning political projects into statements of national identity. This or that project or interest merely 'expresses' or articulates a pre-existing identity. In a democracy, therefore, there are always as many national identities as individuals. If this is the case no typology, however elaborate, can capture the perpetual metamorphosis of its manifestations and least of all can it connect it to the empirical characteristics

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of individuals, since 'national identity', *pace* the perennial attempts of surveys to measure it, is not something individuals possess, rather than a way of talking about what imagined 'passions' might bind them to their fellow citizens.

The chaotic evolution of the UK's citizenship and nationality laws, not to mention its constitutional structure, might thus be seen as the spectacular success the state in Britain has enjoyed in legitimating itself to its constituent population; Ireland is another matter entirely. The genius of Whitehall, at least